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**Life after leaving:  
A look at the long term outcomes for women who  
leave abusive relationships**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Overview**

This study is the first to examine the long term outcomes for women who leave an abusive relationship and enter a refuge or safe house before being re-housed. It builds on the work of two previous studies on immediate and short term outcomes, to report on the overall situation of these women up to eight years after leaving the relationship. The effectiveness of existing support is assessed and recommendations made as to the areas where enhanced service provision is likely to assist a successful transition to independent living.

### **Method**

With the guidance and support of the refuges and safe houses who took part in the earlier studies, a full risk assessment was carried out on those women whose whereabouts were known. Contact with 22 women was considered to be safe, of whom 12 responded positively. Firm outcome evidence was available for a further 6 of these women, together with a further 4 where contact was not considered safe, or where a precise address was not available. Semi-structured interviews were carried out at a time and place to suit the participants and were taped and transcribed. Broad themes were then identified and used to structure this report.

### **Reasons for responding**

The women who chose to respond wanted to share their experiences in their new lives to help other women. This included difficulties and major problems, as well as achievements. Additionally, they were anxious to raise public awareness of the longer term effects of abuse.

### **Housing**

Although the majority had become satisfied with their new accommodation, they felt that little attention had been paid to their specific needs with regard to safety, physical mobility and accessibility. Properties were often in a poor state of repair and maintenance was slow. Where accommodation had proved inappropriate, or temporary (for example B&B, homeless hostels, temporary lets) women felt insecure, reluctant to invest emotionally in the community around them, or to plan for their future. This delayed their recovery from the abuse.

### **Housing - recommendations**

- The specific needs of the woman and her children should be considered in allocating appropriate accommodation.
- Every effort should be made to re-house women on a permanent basis.
- Property should be in reasonable condition before the family moves in and maintenance should be timely and adequate.

### **Home**

The concept of 'home' was of central importance to women, providing a safe space for themselves and their children. Building up a home, often from very little, began to build their confidence and creativity. It was difficult to access sources for basic furniture and equipment, Community Grants were inconsistent in their application and women often had to rely on donations from friends, or from the refuge.

## **Home - recommendations.**

- Community Grants should be consistently applied across the country.
- Support should be available for voluntary groups who provide recycled furniture and white goods at minimal cost.
- An allowance for decorating materials would assist the transition from house to home.

## **Community and neighbourhood**

Low self-esteem, lack of confidence and the isolation imposed by the abuser initially made it difficult for women to develop friendships in their new communities and to build trust in those around them. Once these barriers had been overcome, community support was viewed very positively.

## **Formal support systems – Resettlement, agencies and organisations**

Support from the refuge was considered vital by the women, who valued both practical help and the emotional support which encouraged them to become independent. They wanted low intensity support to be available for longer and for contacts to be available in the evenings and at night, when they felt most isolated and vulnerable. Some women have been so damaged by abuse that they will always need some form of support, although refuge services may not continue to be appropriate. Women had, in general, a negative view of agency responses and were reluctant to contact them direct. Working with the refuge worker in making contact was more likely to produce a positive and empowering outcome.

## **Formal support systems – recommendations**

- Resettlement support to be available across the UK, so that a woman who settles outside the refuge area can access support.
- Low intensity support to be available over a longer period.
- Consideration of the type of support services that could be used by women needing life-long support.
- Access to emotional support in the evenings and at night. If such services are available, either nationally or locally, this needs to be given wider publicity.
- Agencies to become more aware of the specific problems created by the impact of domestic violence and abuse and the effect this may have had on women.
- Co-ordinated agency approaches to avoid confusion and apparently conflicting requirements.

## **Informal support systems – former residents and family**

In general, friendships with former residents faded as new acquaintances were made and differences tolerated while in the refuge became more apparent. Contact with families, often limited by the abuser and curtailed for reasons of safety when in the refuge could be re-established once women were re-housed. For most women, some degree of family support was available, but for a small number, contact had proved detrimental and the relationship had had to be terminated.

### **Informal support systems – recommendations**

- Drop In, or similar support groups might provide a context for women to keep in touch with former residents in a general setting and this could also provide a link to further refuge support if needed.

### **Making new intimate relationships**

All of the women were extremely wary of making new long term relationships, especially with resident partners, although they missed the closeness and affection that this could bring. Where these relationships had developed, letting go of past experiences and trusting the new partner had proved difficult. Taking into account all the evidence where outcomes were known, over 1/3 of the women had been, or were, involved in a further abusive relationship after leaving the refuge. It seems probable that loneliness, isolation and the lack of readily available support may have played a part in this.

### **Making new intimate relationships – recommendations**

- Self help and support groups to be established to provide mutual support and counter feelings of isolation and vulnerability.
- Telephone contact to be available for emotional support.

### **Physical and emotional health**

In general, physical health had improved since leaving the relationship and addictive behaviours had reduced or ceased. Emotional health was far more volatile, with three-quarters of the women speaking of being overwhelmed at times by feelings of anxiety and depression. These had lessened over the period of the study, but were still in evidence up to six years after leaving the relationship. Counselling had been helpful for some women, but not for others. It had been most beneficial where the counsellor had a clear understanding of domestic violence and its effects.

### **Physical and emotional health – recommendations**

- Greater understanding among the medical profession of the impact and long term effects of abuse.
- Counselling to be more readily available for women who experience domestic violence and abuse. Counsellors need to have an understanding of the ways in which abuse may be manifested and the long term implications for emotional health.

### **Work, education, leisure**

Only 1/3 of the women were in paid employment. For the remainder, obtaining or returning to work was dependent on the availability of low cost, or informal, childcare, including after-school activities and of flexible working hours. Similar factors restricted them in obtaining qualifications leading to better paid jobs and avoiding the so-called 'poverty trap'. Managing on a low income was a constant struggle and limited the opportunities for leisure activities and outings with their children. The majority of the women were actively involved in helping other disadvantaged groups in some way. This was clearly important to them as a way of giving something back to society. For some, this had provided a way back into paid employment.

## **Work and education – recommendations**

- Better availability of low cost, quality, childcare and after-school activities.
- Financial assistance to access further education.
- Encouragement to take up voluntary work as a route back into paid work.
- Restructuring the benefit system to correct the present anomalies.

## **Children**

Women were deeply concerned over the effect domestic violence and abuse had had on their children and prioritised giving them a stable and caring environment to assist the process of recovery. A number of the children had displayed behavioural problems, but women had found it hard to obtain appropriate support without a lengthy referral process and medical intervention. Child contact arrangements were a source of apprehension and potential abuse for two-thirds of the women who had such arrangements. Where no contact existed, women still lived in fear of being found by their abuser or his/her family. This fear and anxiety showed little evidence of lessening with the years; it affected the lives of women and their children to a marked degree.

## **Children – recommendations**

- Wider availability of counselling and support groups for children who have been in situations of domestic violence.
- Judicial system to be more sensitive to issues around child contact when domestic violence is a factor.
- Greater understanding by agencies and organisations of the need for confidentiality and security of information to assist women in providing a safe environment for themselves and their children.

## **Looking forward**

Women felt that, since leaving the relationship, they had become more positive and confident. Although there were still problems in their lives, they were looking ahead and planning for the future. Key issues in a successful transition had been suitable accommodation, support which built confidence and establishing new networks for ongoing support.

## **The refuge**

The stay in the refuge had given women a place of safety, a space to recover and the opportunity to be with people who understood their experiences. Many of them were convinced that without this help, they and possibly their children, would be dead.

## **The refuge – additional services women would have liked.**

- More time to talk to workers
- Greater availability of counselling and emotional support.
- Preparation for moving out to include;
  - Guidance in financial matters, including debt handling and budgeting.
  - Understanding of the emotional difficulties they might face and sources of help.

- External support groups linked to the refuge.

### **Women for women services**

Women were generally in favour of women for women services, but emphasised that it was attitude rather than gender that was important, together with a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical experience. They saw a role for male workers both in providing positive role models for their children and in showing women that not all men were potential, or actual, abusers.

### **Women for women services – recommendations**

- Women for women services to be available for women fleeing abuse, both in refuges and, if required, within housing and other agencies.

### **Messages**

Women were invited to send a message in their own words to other women experiencing domestic violence and abuse. Their comments covered the gathering of evidence, leaving the relationship and staying away, the effects on children, the need to tell someone and the benefits of life after leaving. They deserve to be read in full.

## **Introduction**

Between 2000 and 2002, I carried out interviews with 23 women who had left an abusive relationship and gone into a refuge run by members of the Women's Aid Federation of England. The aim was to gain a better understanding of their practical and emotional support needs. At the same time, I talked to those responsible for providing services on the ground; managers, generalist and specialist workers, support staff and volunteers. These findings were reported to the refuges involved and have now been published (Abrahams, 2007). Subsequently, I was part of a team carrying out a similar study on behalf of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now the Department for Communities and Local Government) whose remit extended to cover other groups considered to be vulnerable; young people leaving care, ex-offenders, teenage parents and those with drug, alcohol or mental health issues. In this study, a total of 20 women who had experienced domestic violence and abuse were interviewed while in a refuge and again six months later. The refuges that collaborated in this project included those run directly by Housing Associations, those managed by Women's Aid on behalf of Housing Associations and refuges owned and run by Women's Aid groups. The full report and a separate report on good practice are available on the web (Supporting People, 2007).

Valuable information was obtained from both of these projects; but I felt that what was still missing was any longer term view of their experiences from women who had moved back into their communities. The last time work of this nature was carried out was in the 1980's, since when there have been massive social, legal and economic changes which have impacted on women's lives. Listening to more recent experiences would provide information on women's needs after leaving the refuge and help to identify any gaps in service provision and the development of appropriate, targeted and cost-effective services. Many of the women who had talked to me in the two previous studies had said that they would welcome the chance to meet again a few years down the line, to talk about how they were getting on. Now, with the help of a grant from the British Academy and the enthusiastic assistance of all the refuges involved, this has been made possible.

The report which follows is based on the broad areas covered in the previous studies, but extends this into the continuing experiences of women and children in their new communities. It also seeks to reflect the aspects that mattered to the women themselves. As before, I found that there was remarkable consistency across the interviews as to what was important, where problems arose and what their needs for support were. Their voices provide an insight into the lengthy and difficult process of rebuilding lives after the experience of domestic violence and abuse and offers pointers as to where additional support could enhance the prospect of a successful transition.

## **Method**

Although women had indicated that they would be happy to see me again, this could not be taken as an invitation to contact them direct; they might well have moved away, changed their minds, or be in a new, non-violent relationship where the partner was unaware of previous contacts. It was also possible that they had returned to the abusive partner, or be in a new abusive relationship, so that further contact might put them and their children at risk. I worked closely, therefore, with the local refuges to



ascertain who might safely be contacted; where there was considered to be any risk to the woman, no action was taken. In the event, contact was considered safe with twenty-two women, of whom twelve responded positively (54.5 %). Three of these responses came from the original study, with two of them having been out of the relationship for five years and the other for eight. Nine were from the later study and had been out of the relationship for between four and five years. Firm information was available on a further ten women; four from the group who were not directly contactable and six of those who chose not to respond. This came either from the refuge workers, or from other women with whom they had stayed in contact. There was also a fair amount of anecdotal evidence on the outcomes for other women, but this was not considered to be reliable enough to be included in this report. All those who responded were given full information about the purpose and aim of the project and gave written consent. The interviews, which were at a time and place to suit them, lasted between one and two hours and were taped and transcribed. They were also invited to complete a feedback form commenting on the interview and adding any further comments or thoughts.

Women were asked about their experiences of being re-housed, the community they now lived in, their physical and emotional health and the formal and informal support systems they accessed. Other areas covered included work, education and leisure activities, personal and organisational relationships and any contact either with the original abuser, his/her family, or any subsequent abusive relationships. They were also asked to assess the long term impact the refuge had had on their lives and subsequent life choices and invited to send a message to other women experiencing domestic violence. Not every woman was able to tell a success story; there had been difficult times for all of them, mistakes and setbacks to discuss, as well as lucky breaks and achievements to celebrate and some were still facing major problems as they struggled to rebuild their lives.

## **Why did women choose to respond?**

I asked all of the women what it was that had made them decide to respond to my letter. One of the key factors was that I had met them before and built up trust that I would listen and bear accurate witness to their stories. Two women commented that each interview had provided a valuable space for them to reflect on their progress and think about where they were going in their lives. Sylvia<sup>1</sup> said 'You've kind of been on that journey as well, with me'. They also saw these visits as marking the end of a chapter in their lives and that they were, in effect, saying goodbye. Confirmation of this may, perhaps, be indicated by the fact that I received only two feedback forms following the interviews.

Most wanted to show me how far they had come; the effort and ingenuity that had gone into the creation of a real home for themselves and their children, education, holidays, perhaps a job and for some, a new and non violent partner. They also wanted to discuss their struggles on a personal level in achieving this and the difficulties they had faced and were still facing.

The major factor for all of them, however, was the desire for their information to reach a wider audience. Firstly, they wanted their experiences to help other women who might be experiencing domestic abuse, to tell them that it was possible to come through it. As Sally put it; 'You **can** pick up your life again'. Secondly they felt it was important to raise awareness of abuse in general. Lindy commented that 'Society

needs to understand'. By taking part, they hoped that their experiences could make a positive impact on others. Amber saw this clearly:

I've got scars on my face, you know, I lost every ... so much and it's ... yeah, I can't waste the experience, I do have to do something with it. And right now I'm not able to, but you can. So I have to share anything that could be put to use for other people.

Women who chose not to respond to my invitation may have done so for a variety of reasons; they may have felt that they had not lived up to the hopes and expectations expressed in previous interviews and seen this as a 'failure'; they may have decided to close the door on the past and did not wish to be reminded of it; or they might have been in a new relationship and felt that talking to me might jeopardise this.

## Housing

With regard to the accommodation they went to on first leaving the refuge, women said they had had very limited or no choice as to what they were offered. If they did not know the area, or were unable to go round and look at the situation on the ground, they felt anxious and uncertain about their safety on moving, in addition to their understandable concerns about possible retribution from their abuser, if they were found. Although the majority of the women were reasonably, or very happy with the results, after they had been in the property a number of years, they felt that, in general, little attention had been paid to their particular housing needs, especially those who had mobility problems. Council properties and former council properties had not, in general, been in good condition and maintenance of these properties, together with those in private lets, was generally condemned as being slow, poor and inefficient. Housing Associations' own properties were generally in better condition and their performance on maintenance generally considered good. Although debts incurred on rented property while in the abusive relationship did not appear to have hindered the initial re-housing, it was taken into consideration if a move was requested at a later date.

### Current housing situation

Housing Association	4
Council property	4
Private let	1
Owner/occupier	1
B&B	1
Temporary accommodation	1

Eight women were now in permanent accommodation in the same city, or town, where they had been in a refuge and two families were in adjacent localities. Three of this group had moved after initial re-housing to other properties in the same area; one to provide more space for her new partner and his children and one as an owner/occupier with her new partner. The third had moved to a private let because of the unsuitability of her allocated property, both in terms of neighbourhood and accessibility. The remaining two women had had to move several times for reasons including personal safety, and were in short-term temporary accommodation, with all

its attendant drawbacks, including reluctance to plan ahead, or to attempt to integrate into the new community, because of the probability of having to move on at short notice. This delayed the time when they would feel more able to recover from the abuse. Although they did what they could to make the space feel more homelike, they were understandably reluctant to invest time and energy in what might be only a very temporary lodging and they were looking forward to having a more permanent home, where they could settle down.

Home - a place of their own – meant far more than just a roof over their heads and was of vital importance to all the women. No longer the locus of the abuse, it was somewhere that was ‘just for them’ and their children, with their own front door to close out danger. They were immensely proud of their homes and the ingenuity that they had put into creating ‘somewhere that I can call my own’. Most had had to leave furniture and furnishings behind, often on a number of occasions, and Community Grants, to help them buy basic furniture and equipment, varied in amount and were inconsistent in application. In a few areas, there were voluntary organisations which collected and refurbished donated furniture and made it available at a reduced or nominal cost; other women had relied on gifts from family or friends, or donations to the refuge. Although they were grateful for the donations that had helped them to start again, they were gradually replacing these and any pieces from their old life, with their own choices and putting their own touches to house and garden.

Colour and redecorating played a major part in this, as they painted a new, more vibrant, life for themselves. Briony’s partner had fixed ideas on colour - everything had to be magnolia. Her response was to turn her own new home into a rainbow of colour - every shade except magnolia! This process of transforming a house into a home seemed, in some respects, to begin a transformation within the women themselves as they developed a safe base for their new lives and made decisions as to what they wanted for themselves.

## **Community and neighbourhood**

Despite their initial misgivings, all but one of the women who had remained in their first permanent accommodation felt that they were settled in the new community and were happy with their access to schools, transport systems and shops. The sole exception was a woman with major health problems and impaired mobility, who felt that she had become a target for anti-social behaviour. (This worry was also a factor in the decision to move again mentioned by one of the women who had moved after initial re-housing.) Those who had moved to fresh permanent accommodation were all also pleased with the environment around them. Several women commented that they now felt a sense of belonging. Lindy said:

I love ... see, I just feel it’s like home. When we drive (off the motorway) coming along the road there and you see the hills and I just ... you know, when you’ve been on a long trip and you just, sort of, ‘Ahhh’. That’s how I feel. It’s just that view, its home, it’s nice.

Women often took a considerable time to develop friendships within their new neighbourhoods. They found it hard to trust other people and to believe that they were being genuinely friendly, not just polite and insincere. Once this barrier had been overcome, the benefits in terms of support and confidence building were considerable. Nevertheless, women spoke of being wary of making close friendships,

revealing too much of themselves and of making the first move towards acquaintance. It was interesting to note that often, the most valued friendships and support came from neighbours much older than the women who might, perhaps, have come to be considered as surrogate parents.

## **Formal support systems**

### *Resettlement*

Resettlement support had been available for ten of the women on their initial move from the refuge. Although moving into their own home was exciting, it was also a time of stress and anxiety. Having to apply for services, complete application forms and co-ordinate everything was difficult, particularly for those women whose abusive partners had not allowed them any voice in decision making, or organisation within the home. Having a support worker, who they knew and trusted, to guide them through this process at the beginning of their new lives, was considered invaluable. Practical support ranged from local knowledge of the statutory services and agencies to where women could find cheap furniture and essential electrical equipment. Where the new accommodation was not in good condition, workers had the contacts and confidence, which women initially lacked, to get things put right. Leanne, whose council house concealed major and life threatening problems, was now able to tackle problems like this on her own, but learnt from working alongside the refuge outreach worker in the first place:

Well, ... Let's put it this way ... she kicked council up their arse! Because it would have taken a lot longer, but she was ringing up all the time and how was this doing, how was that doing. And she was brilliant.

Empowering women to take action for themselves meant building up their confidence and providing initial support. The fact that the worker knew them, understood both the physical and mental effects of domestic violence and treated them with respect, as autonomous individuals started this process. Just as important as practical help was the emotional support workers provided – listening, encouraging and, if necessary, challenging.

Because of the low self-esteem and lack of confidence resulting from the abuse, women were nervous about approaching organisations on their own, fearing rejection or the sort of poor treatment that they may have experienced in previous approaches. Making the first contact in company with the worker was more likely to result in a successful introduction and productive relationships. Making the initial contact for them and arranging for their needs would not have built confidence; conversely, giving them the phone number of an organisation and leaving it to them was likely, as they said, to result in them not taking action.

From being in a refuge, where there was always at least one other adult, to being on their own, independent, but also solely responsible for themselves and their children, was an emotional shock. Liz said 'It was quite daunting ... being on my own, cos I hadn't been on my own for quite a while'. Many of them had not anticipated the extent of this impact and would have liked some kind of warning about this from workers before they left the refuge, so that they were better prepared and so, perhaps, better able to cope with the transition. Feelings of isolation and vulnerability were particularly strong at night, when fears and memories came crowding back. It was at times like these that they would have liked to call someone for a chat and reassurance,

but didn't feel they wanted to 'trouble' (their words) the helpline, when they were aware that there were women who desperately needed to do so. Sylvia commented:

I would say that little ball of, probably a month or so, transition is the hardest. And maybe where you perhaps could do with a hotline number, you know, that you could just pick up 24 hours a day and say 'I'm really having a day where it's not going well' and, you know, and I waited till the kids have gone to bed and now I'm falling apart.' And someone's on the other end to say, like, you know, 'This is only today ... and tomorrow ... Take a deep breath, cleansing breath and everything will be fine', you know'.

Women had received a high degree of support during the first six months of their transition to the community and this had then gradually tapered off. Although they fully understood that this had to happen and that other women needed this help, there was a sense of sadness and loss and a feeling that it would be good to have some informal contact afterwards with the women who had done so much to help them. Although they all said that they would have no hesitation in contacting the refuge again, there was also a feeling that they had taken enough of precious resources and that they ought to be able to cope alone. Continuing some form of contact would, therefore, make it easier if they needed to make contact again. This had, in fact, happened for a few of them, when major problems associated with the abuse resurfaced. All of them commented that the provision of long term, low intensity support needed to be far more flexible in terms of length, although they appreciated that refuge resources were finite. Workers have also commented to me that some women have been so damaged by abuse that they are always going to need support but that there are few places for these women to turn to. In this respect, Housing Associations who have an integrated system of refuges, sheltered and supported housing, together with support teams, can provide a solution, but this is not readily available for many women.

Where support had not been available either when they had first left the refuge, or on a subsequent enforced move, women felt they had struggled emotionally and/or physically and would have appreciated the support, reassurance and encouragement that this service provided.

#### *Agencies and organisations*

Most of the women had approached statutory agencies and organisations for help during the period of the abuse and all of them had contact during their time in the refuge and the initial period following resettlement. For two-thirds, this contact had continued subsequently. Women's views on these services were, in general, fairly negative. Although there had been individual members of staff who had gone out of their way to understand and be helpful, this had not generally been the case and women had felt intimidated, patronised and put down. Further problems arose if the officer assigned to them was male, since many of the women said they felt apprehensive and uncertain when dealing with men in general. This was particularly true immediately after leaving the refuge. The attitude of these agencies was contrasted with that of the refuge workers, who combined a bracing, and challenging, approach with the ability to listen and encourage. As the previous section indicated, women were, therefore, reluctant to approach any organisations on their own and told me that they considered they were treated very differently when they had the

assistance of an advocate like the resettlement worker, or another voluntary agency, such as Shelter to work with them until they gained confidence.

It sometimes seemed to them that pressure from agencies was making it more difficult to rebuild their lives. 'They were all on my back' was a common statement especially where several agencies were involved and women felt harassed and confused by apparently contradictory demands. As Sally said:

It seemed like we were answering to everybody. Asking people for permission. Like being back at home really (i.e. with the abuser). You felt you needed permission to breathe'.

It was at times like these that the resettlement worker was particularly valuable in helping women to prioritise demands and act as a translator, or mediator, between women and agencies. Molly explained:

I was getting really depressed because I'd got Social Services on my back at the time. I'd got the Social Worker, Family Support Worker, I'd got Home Start coming in, the Health Visitor. Everybody was against me. The only person that was there for me was Lesley. (resettlement worker)

With her support, Molly had been able to discuss the situation with the agencies concerned and agree priorities with them, so that she and all the agencies and organisations involved were able to work together.

### **Informal support systems**

#### *Contact with residents or former residents*

In general, women did not stay in contact for long with those they had met in the refuge, as they established new relationships within their community. In some cases, differences in life-style, outlook, or opinions, had caused a friendship to wither away, or a deliberate decision had been made to cut off from people they had been able to tolerate while in the refuge. When these friendships were maintained, it was often only with occasional meetings or via text messages. On a couple of occasions, I was asked to convey messages between women who had lost touch with each other and this may have resulted in renewed contact.

#### *Family*

When women first entered the refuge they had often cut themselves off from friends and family, in order to keep both themselves and those they cared about, safe from the abuser or his/her family. As Tara explained 'They're getting on, do you know? They don't need the stress and strain and that. My dad is in bad health and that.' In any case, some had concealed the abuse from their family, because of the shame and guilt they experienced and had gradually become isolated by the abuser from potential support networks. Moving back into the community enabled them to re-establish contact, if they wanted to and possibly receive support in their new lives. For two women, whose families had been in ignorance of the abuse, this had been a positive move; their families had become powerful sources of support, without taking over their lives. For others, the situation was much more mixed, with support from some members of the family and not from others and a volatile and constantly changing situation. From only two families had there been a complete lack of understanding

and a negative and hostile approach; one mother still insisted on writing to her daughter using her original name, rather than a new identity - a move which could potentially endanger the whole family. For both of these women, the family attitude had caused deep sadness. They avoided contact as much as possible, to minimise this distress, but felt that the families' response to them had left them very much on their own.

## **Making new intimate relationships**

The difficulties of trusting in others, which was evident in their dealings with agencies and people in their new communities, was even more in evidence when women discussed making new intimate relationships. Despite the abuse, feelings of love and loyalty for their previous partners were still in evidence and several of them talked wistfully of missing the cuddles and closeness even an abusive relationship could bring. Two women had, in fact, entered new relationships shortly after leaving the refuge. Liz had tried to help a former friend who she hoped could change, but had soon realised that things were going badly wrong. 'I thought, 'Here we go again – different place, same crap.' And I was determined this time just to get shot and stay put.' She had found the strength from within herself to end the relationship, but also to remain friends. Amber had felt isolated and unsupported:

I was just so lonely and I'd just come back from my mum's and she hadn't ... it was really upsetting and I went out, I was drinking out cos I wanted to make friends. I didn't have anybody in my life. And there he was ... and then I asked him back ... I'd clutched ... I was very vulnerable and, yeah, he managed to get into my life.

Eventually, she had had to flee again from increasing physical and emotional violence. The evidence from other women I talked to and from refuge workers, suggested that five of the women in the original groups, where contact was considered to pose a risk to them, or where no response was received, had either returned to the relationship or were with new and abusive partners. If the two short term relationships mentioned above are included, then more than 1/3 of the women where definite outcomes were known had become involved in a further violent partnership. This is an extremely disturbing finding. If the loneliness and isolation referred to above, together with the lack of any readily available longer term support, played a part in this, as seems likely, there is a compelling case for ensuring the availability of longer term support, perhaps by establishing support and self help groups across the UK.

Current relationships: Women not contacted or not responding

Living independently	3
New non violent relationship	2
New abusive relationship	4
Back with abuser	1

### Current relationships: Women responding

Living alone or with dependent children	7
New resident non violent partner	2
New, non resident non violent partner	1
With previously known partner, non violent now	2

At the time they talked to me, eight of the women were now living independently, either alone, or with their children and the majority were emphatic that they would never want to have a live in partner again. Jeannie said, 'To tell you the truth, I don't want to be with anybody. I'm quite happy just being here on my own.' And Leanne agreed, 'I wouldn't live together with somebody again, I don't think. I'm happy on my own.' One of them was, in fact, in a long term relationship, but did not live with her partner and another was tentatively and slowly rebuilding a relationship with a former boyfriend who had suffered abuse from his wife.

The memories of love and trust betrayed and exploited made it difficult to open up to the possibility of a new partnership, but two women had established permanent relationships with new and non violent partners. Liz talked of the difficulty of learning to trust and show the warm, affectionate side of her nature:

I have found it hard, meeting someone that's actually loving and tactile. I'm starting to soften to it now and see that he hasn't got a game plan, he's not manipulative and he truly loves me for me. All them thoughts have gone like you have to be guarded and always thinking what are they after and things like that.

Both women were getting married the following year and although, on one level, they were elated, they were also scared of the commitment they were making and about what could happen. Lindy was very aware of her underlying apprehension:

I think what I'll always have is ... I'm always expecting ... that's my relationship with John ... I'm waiting for that ... Its like ... Do you know, if you go out and you're having a nice evening, having a few drinks and ... I'm waiting for the nastiness to turn still. And I'm thinking 'he's not David (ex) but he just .... You do sort of go backwards and forwards through time. John's always saying, 'Lindy, please, I'm not David'. I know you're not, but it's real. You're waiting for it to happen and it's not happened, so why am I waiting? I don't know!

The remaining two women were now living with partners they had known before the abusive relationship which had resulted in their stay in a refuge. I was told that the relationships were non-violent although one of the men concerned had had a previous conviction for violence.

### **Physical and emotional health**

In physical terms, the majority of the women (eight) were in good health, and were concerned to ensure that they and their children ate and exercised in ways that maintained and improved their health. Several of them commented that they had never felt better physically. Three of the others had underlying health problems



unconnected with the abuse, which limited their activities and, for one of them, further major complications had developed, which severely restricted what she was now able to do and, in fact, her life expectancy. For one woman, physical abuse and related suicide attempts had caused permanent internal and external damage to her body; additionally she had just completed a detox programme which was causing further physical problems. She was not alone in having used drugs and/or alcohol to numb the pain of domestic abuse. As Leanne told me, ‘when I was smashed out of my mind, it didn't hurt as much. Use of drugs or excessive alcohol consumption was not tolerated in the refuges and there was no evidence that former habits of use had resumed. At the time of the first interviews, all of the women were smoking heavily. Some had now given up and, for the rest, consumption had dropped significantly.

It was a different story when I asked them about their emotional health. For three-quarters of the women, memories of the abuse still haunted them and bouts of anxiety and depression were frequently mentioned, even up to six years after leaving the relationship. The only exceptions to this were two women who had managed to establish reasonably amicable relationships with their abusers and one woman who had been out of the relationship for almost eight years and had extensive counselling.

For most, the times when these feelings overwhelmed them were getting less, but could still strike with unpredictable suddenness. Sally talked of the difficult days; ‘it seems to be locked away, and then some days it’ll just come and that's when I have real bad days. ... I just stay in bed.’ Jeannie had found that these feelings had kicked in more and more after leaving the refuge:

Sometimes I’ll sit here and I’m just crying for the whole day, sometimes the whole weekend. I’m just like ‘Oh my God’. But then I just get myself back up.

During their time in the refuge, or at some point afterwards, eight women had accessed some type of counselling to assist with their emotional difficulties, and one of them had gone on to take a course in counselling at college. This was not always the solution to their problems however; much depended on finding a counsellor who they trusted, who understood the effects of domestic abuse and who was able to hold them safely while they dealt with their issues. When this therapeutic relationship had been established, it had been of enormous help to them. Others would have liked to try again but were nervous about finding the right person.

## **Work, education, leisure**

Four women were in paid employment at the time of the interviews. One, who had confided in her Human Resources department before leaving, had been able to return to her managerial post in a large organisation, which had been held open for her. Three women had found jobs afterwards. All of this group had at least one child of secondary school age or more, at the time of leaving the relationship, or were able to fit their work round the school day. They were also confident that their children would be able to deal with the situation. Two of these women had obtained high level professional qualifications since leaving the refuge and were considering further courses of study. One of the remaining women was continuing a course of study which, she hoped, would eventually lead to a good job with adequate wages and a future. Again, her son was at school nearby and college hours fitted round this.

Volunteering as a way of gaining experience and moving into paid work, or exploring a change of career, was a route that had been followed by two of those now

in paid work and Sylvia, who had sought debt counselling for herself, was now working as a volunteer in this area and training to enable her to follow the same path. As a volunteer, she had flexible working hours which enabled her to fit round school times and her son would soon be approaching an age when supervision would not be a requirement.

Of the remaining group, two had physical illnesses which precluded working and two were in temporary accommodation and were uncertain when they would be moving on, making them reluctant to commit to any outside activities. Finally, both Briony and Sally had children of primary school age who, they felt, needed them to be at home for them, although their stated intention was to look for work once the children were older. They, in common with all the other women, identified three areas which made it difficult for women with young children to work. The first was the availability of affordable and accessible childcare, including access to after school activities. The second, jobs which were flexible enough and local enough to allow for school routines and parental involvement with the school. Finally, the so called 'poverty trap' which dictated that a part-time job needed to pay enough to compensate for the wider benefits they would lose. Jobs like this, for women with no qualifications were remote and might not be in the area they lived in. To obtain relevant qualifications meant finding a local college with suitable courses and although some colleges provide crèches at low cost, or free, where this is not available, there is often a lack of affordable childcare. There are two further factors which might be relevant to the ability to work. One is the continuing low confidence and self-doubt arising from the abuse. As Sylvia explained:

I notice more how it's affected me, this second guessing, always thinking like 'Well am I sure about that person? Am I sure about what I'm saying?' You know, whereas before it's like I was totally confident. You know, I was always a confident person especially in a work ethic environment. And now it's always that little bit 'Ooh, I'm not so sure', you know, whether it's just cos I've been out of work and haven't got that, you know, motivation or feeling going or what, I don't know. So that is something that annoys me inside, you know. I'm thinking is it age, is it because you were so wrong then that you're so scared now of being wrong again, you know.

The second factor concerns the need for their children to have a period of predictable and settled family life after all they had been through. This is discussed further in the section dealing with children's needs and experiences.

For most families, excursions and holidays with their children are an important part of their lives. Many of these women had never been allowed to enjoy this freedom and they were eager to see new places and give their children the same opportunities as their peers. For women who were in work, or with a new partner, this had proved an immense pleasure, but it had not been so easy for the majority. Some had been able to access holidays provided by voluntary agencies; others had been given holidays by their birth or extended families. Again, it was this group that struggled to go on excursions; as they pointed out, the cost of entry to paid attractions, plus internal prices for rides, guides and food mounted up, especially with more than one child of school age. They showed a lot of ingenuity in finding small trips which were both interesting and inexpensive and involving the children in budgeting household expenditure. Nevertheless, they felt guilty that they were depriving their family of the things that other children enjoyed. A separate social life for the women themselves,

including evenings out, was similarly curtailed by cost, but also by the availability of affordable and reliable child care.

## **Helping others**

One heart-warming discovery was the extent to which most of these women (ten out of the twelve) were reaching out, in some way, to help other vulnerable groups, not necessarily women experiencing abuse. For four of them, it was through work or voluntary activities, including Women's Aid. Two helped at local support group meetings, one had applied to become a refuge volunteer and one, whose work took her into higher education areas, had seized chances of talking to students on Women's Studies courses about the effects of domestic violence. Molly, whose incapacity limited her outdoor activities, acted as a mentor to the teenagers on her estate and Charmian had trained and worked as a volunteer in a helpline and drop in centre for women for some time. Although she had found this emotionally stressful and was currently taking a break, she was confident that she would be returning as soon as she could. None of these women were making a big deal out of this - sometimes it was only a chance comment they made that led to the disclosure, but it was clear that it was important for them to take this action and seen as a way to contribute something to society. It was also clear, during our discussions, that most of them were open about their experiences of abuse and the effect it had had on them, using their knowledge to direct other women to sources of help.

## **Money**

During the time in the refuge, women commented that they had been, to some extent, protected from the full economic rigour of the outside world and that taking total financial responsibility had proved daunting. Many of them had never been allowed to handle money matters while in the abusive relationship and faced a steep learning curve. Although support from the resettlement worker had been of great help, some suggested that more opportunities to learn skills like budgeting, making simple applications and dealing with agencies before being re-housed would have freed up support to deal with other problems, or to help other women.

Apart from the four who were in employment, most were receiving some form of state benefits. For these women, managing on a low income, providing a healthy diet and clothing for growing children was extremely difficult, requiring great care and discipline. There was also the desire to establish a nice home and to give their children the same opportunities as their peers – holidays, excursions and school trips. Managing was made more difficult by wide differences in the way Community Grants were assessed and if there was no access to low cost, renovated furniture and white goods, or support in managing debts and obtaining credit.

Some women had initially got into debt through trying to meet these needs, or through a failure to understand the complexities of the welfare system. Others had rent arrears, or debts incurred during their relationship to pay off. Delays in getting to grips with debts made matters worse - one woman became so frightened that she would not open any official looking post, hoping that the problem would go away. Support from resettlement and outreach workers had proved invaluable in helping them to plan and implement solutions to the difficulties. Community organisations which provided financial guidance and debt counselling had also provided much

needed help and advice. This was an area where empowerment was particularly important – sorting the problems without giving the women the skills to avoid further difficulties was likely to result in a recurrence at a later date.

Both for those who had incurred debts and those who had not, financial planning and careful management had become a way of life - money was put away every week, luxuries which had been purchased in the initial euphoria of moving in, such as extra TV channels, trimmed back and written details of when debts had been or would be cleared were shown to me. One woman, who had run into debt in her desire to provide their first ever holiday for her three children, showed me her calculations on how she would be able to get back on an even keel financially. Her financial plan showed that, with strict control, she would be clear of debt 12 months after she talked to me, providing no emergencies occurred.

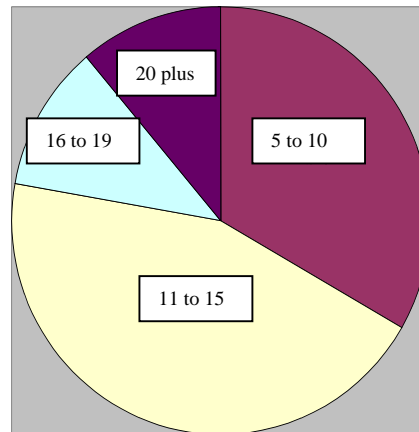
## Children

All of the women were mothers and between them had eighteen children of their own living with them. Ages and distribution figures are shown in the following tables.

Numbers of children with each woman

Women currently without children	2
Women with 1 resident child	3
Women with 2 resident children	6
Women with 3 resident children	1

Age distribution of children



<u>Ages</u>	<u>Number</u>
5 to 10	6
11 to 15	8
16 to 19	2
20 plus	2

In addition, two women had the young children of a new partner visiting, or staying with them on a regular basis. Six of the women had also had other children, who were either now adopted, or in foster/kinship care and for three, there were also adult children permanently living away from home. Two women did not have any of their children living with them, because they had been taken into care by social services very recently and discussions were still taking place on the best outcomes for the children.

They were all deeply concerned for their children's welfare, both for those that were with them and for those from whom they were temporarily or permanently separated. Most talked of the trauma that their children had gone through, firstly from witnessing, or suffering, abuse, then by leaving their home, school and friends, then in the refuge and finally in settling into yet another new environment. There was a sense of guilt at what they had put them through and a determination to do everything possible to give them a fresh start. One of the most important factors in this, in their view, was to provide a stable home atmosphere to facilitate recovery for the whole family and that this took priority over getting back to work themselves and their own needs for emotional support.

The majority of the children seemed to have settled well into their new surroundings, were making friends and gaining confidence. Nevertheless, seven of the women with resident children and both of those with children in care, talked of behavioural problems ranging from low self-esteem, disruptive and aggressive behaviour, delayed development, depression and anxiety and suicidal thoughts to problems needing intensive psychiatric intervention. One child was receiving psychiatric help; two had been helped by voluntary counselling services, but many of the women commented on how hard it was to get counselling and support for their children from statutory agencies without a lengthy referral process and risking becoming entwined in the medical system, or that social services might get involved..

A number of women would have welcomed the provision of specific floating support and counselling services for their children to assist their recovery. They felt strongly that their children needed support after leaving the refuge, in the same way as they themselves did and that it was particularly important that some form of age related emotional support (not necessarily formal counselling) should be available. One interesting discovery, capable of a wide variety of interpretations, was the choice of career among those children who had thought about this. A third of them had decided on a career in a uniformed service; in a branch of the Armed Forces, Police or Fire services and most had already taken active steps to achieve their aims.

For the women whose children were in care, the brief periods of contact they were allowed were distressing to them and, and they felt, to the children. They felt excluded and, although they understood the prioritising of the children's needs, that their own needs were being marginalised and that the contribution they could make was being ignored.

## **Fear and anxiety**

Six women had formal or informal child contact arrangements with their abuser, which they felt was in the best interests of the children, or had been imposed on them. For two of them, this was not a problem; relationships were amicable and they were able to discuss arrangements and negotiate financial details. For the others, contact caused permanent apprehension as to what might happen and whether further verbal or physical abuse might occur, either to them or to their children. Jeannie told me:

Every time he comes round here, nine times out of the ten, we end up arguing. And I don't like it. The other day we had a really, really bad argument and like I just thought, I just don't want to ... It brings back a lot of memories. It didn't actually become physical. But it could have done and he did threaten me.

For the other women, no contact was involved, as their former partners did not know where they were. Yet continuing fear of being found by their abuser or by his/her family and what might happen if they were found was a constant theme of the interviews. Even when they had moved long distances to escape and perhaps changed the family name, they spoke of 'always looking over my shoulder' and of their fear of visiting any locality where the abuser or their family might possibly frequent. These self-imposed limitations could cause problems if they needed to attend interviews, or court proceedings, or obtain documents; difficulties which were not always understood or handled with sensitivity by agencies. This fear was also evident in the children, who were often reluctant to play outside, or be alone. Sally said 'I **am** worried if he finds out where we are. Alan won't want to go outside then. He'll be too scared.' She, like other mothers, was fearful that the children might be seen and harmed, or possibly abducted, as a way of punishing her for leaving. She had equipped all the family with mobile phones which had the local police contact programmed in. Briony spoke of the time her children had come screaming in to the house having seen a man they thought was their father. She and they retreated away from the windows until he disappeared. This later proved to be a false alarm, but shows the way in which fear throws a shadow over the lives of whole families. None of the women had had specific security devices installed and there was a feeling that they would not be a lot of use if the abuser was determined to gain entry

Nine of the women had been out of the original relationship for between four and five years; three had left between six and eight years ago. It might have been thought that these fears and anxieties would have diminished over the period of time that I had been seeing them, but there was hardly any evidence of this in the interviews. Except for the two women who had established effective contact and one woman who had left the relationship over 7 years ago, who had moved away and also knew that her abuser was a long term prisoner, fear, anxiety and distress were, to a greater or lesser degree, influencing these women's lives and behaviours, whether their abuser knew where they were, or not. It is probable that these feelings will always be there.

## Looking forward

I asked women to reflect on where they were in their lives now. For ten of them, life and their perception of themselves had improved dramatically. They had gained in confidence, felt more positive and emotionally stronger. Independence and the ability to control their own lives was a recurring theme:

I can say what I want, do what I want.	Sally
I can do this and I can do it alone.	Charmian
I am in control and that's good.	Briony
It's made me find myself, what I want and what I don't want. ... I'm the boss. I don't know where it comes from, something just appears I think. If I could bottle it, I'd sell it. Yeah!	Lindy

Women put their own needs more to the fore and felt able to be open about what they wanted. They acknowledged that there were still material problems in their lives; debt, financial constraints, poor housing, work, their children's education. But even when things were not so good at the moment, they were able to see the way ahead. Whereas in earlier interviews they were unable to look further ahead than the next day, or, for some, the next hour, they were now getting on with their lives, looking

into a future full of new possibilities. As Briony put it; ‘we've actually got a future now’.

The barriers to further achievement were still those caused by the abuse; fear, a sense of insecurity and self-doubt, the possibility of retribution and the memories and feelings about the abuse were the unseen companions which they had to deal with and just when they thought everything was fine, these feelings would come back into their lives.

Two women were not in a situation where their quality of life was improving. Amber had only recently escaped from a second physically and emotionally abusive relationship. She was still struggling to cope with life and felt lonely, vulnerable, isolated and suicidal. She did, however, see where she wanted to go and was beginning to find some firm ground in a chaotic existence on which to build. For Molly, who had previously been making progress, increasingly serious health problems had sapped her strength and confidence. She said she had lost the will to live.

## The refuge

Time spent in the refuge

6 months or less	8
7 to 12 months	3
Over 12 months	1

Women were clear about what the refuge had meant to them. First and foremost it was physical and mental safety. The knowledge that the abuser could not reach them while they were there, and that they were with people who understood what they had endured, was, to them, the first step in recovery. Next, they valued the chance to talk about their problems feeling that they would be believed rather than challenged and that they could afford to be open and honest without the need to conceal the situation or make excuses. One or two felt that, on occasions, this had not been the case and they had been distressed at a lack of respect for them and their views. Anger was also expressed by several at women who they regarded as ‘using the system’ to the detriment of those who were genuinely in need. In some cases, this anger was directed at agencies who women felt, were referring families whose problems were not appropriate to a domestic violence refuge.

Experience of peer support was also important - although self-contained accommodation was appreciated, women felt they gained from being able to mix with other women, realise they were not, as they had thought, alone and abnormal and support each other. The refuge also offered them a safe space to recover, reflect and begin to restore their sense of personal integrity. Keira said:

It gave me the 10 weeks that I needed to sit back, to reflect on everything that was being done and take a completely different course in my life. Yes, definitely.

What else would they have liked while in the refuge? More support for their children, more time to talk to workers and more opportunity for counselling and emotional support. Training in life skills, including financial management, would have been helpful in easing the transition to independent living. Women also

commented that, once a potential property had been identified, they would have liked more emotional as well as practical help in making preparations for moving out, so that they were aware of the lows that they might encounter and had some resources to deal with these. Continuing links to the refuge, such as support groups, would also have been welcomed during and after the transition to their new lives. Many women wanted to pay specific tribute to the workers and groups who had helped them. Liz was typical when she said 'I wouldn't be as happy as I am if it wasn't for them giving me a chance and being there for me'. Perhaps the most moving tribute was from Leanne who, five years on, had a little private celebration on the anniversary of the day she first came to the refuge:

Every year, on the 4<sup>th</sup> December, it's another year. That's the day I come to the refuge. I celebrate. Even if it's just having a drink, or summat like that, or just anything. Its just I done another year.

## **Looking back**

There is no doubt that the refuge was, quite literally, a life saver. Seven out of the twelve women felt that, but for the refuge, they would be dead. 'When I think of it' said Jeannie, 'that's the truth, I'd be dead.' Some felt that they would have committed suicide to escape the abuse, prompted by their own feelings of being unworthy to live; others felt they would have been murdered, either because physical violence had gone too far, or because death threats would have been carried out. One woman was sure that at least one of her children would also have been killed. Although on the surface, this may seem melodramatic, many of these women had tried to kill themselves before and their physical injuries inflicted by the abuser had often involved hospitalisation.

## **Women for women services**

Although over 80% of the women (ten out of twelve) were clearly in favour of women for women services, whatever their own sexual proclivities, they raised a number of interesting issues around service provision within this concept. There was a recognition that women fleeing abuse needed to be able to access women only services if they so desired and several wanted to be able to request to be dealt with by women officers in housing and other agencies. As mentioned earlier, some of them still felt uncomfortable in dealing with men in any capacity. Charmian also pointed out that men may also face domestic violence (from women or from other men) and that they too might prefer to be dealt with by other men.

What was important to them was not simply the gender, but the attitude of the worker and they considered that men with the right attitude could provide valuable input. Sylvia thought:

So no, I would see a man or a woman ... because even with women there's some that I don't feel I could talk to. So I think it's not gender as in persona, you know, its how they walk in and make you feel. You know, that they need to be very in tune that they're walking into someone that's probably been through the most horrendous time of their life.



There was also a view that a balance between practical experience and theoretical knowledge was also necessary, as Keira explained:

I think that there should be a fair balance in that in terms of ...I'm not saying that someone that's been to college or been to university, learnt a lot out of a book is not as good as someone that's actually experienced it. But what I'm saying is there should be a balance between the two. Uh ... I do feel that if you have experienced domestic violence and you have been into a refuge you have a far better broad spectrum outlook on exactly what the hell it's like. And if your life has been turned completely upside down you have an even better. Now that sounds terrible but its how I feel.

Women also felt that there needed to be positive male role models for their children, both boys and girls, to counteract the view that they might absorb that all men were bastards and the effects of an all female environment. Possibly the most interesting comment came from Liz, who was concerned about the long term consequences of an all female environment:

I mean, I know it can have lots of problems having men working, but you know, not all men are bad. And I think it makes women more hungry to go out and get a man, because there's no men to be seen, it's all females. From my point of view and ... I do honestly think that men – straight, gay, whatever – should be able to have their input to convince women that not everybody's bad. You know give men a chance to say 'Look you know, all right, you've come across a bad 'un. But I just think it just segregates them a little bit and maybe that's why they rebel and go out and sleep about and shack up with the first man what comes along, because it's been women only.

## **Messages**

I asked all the women what message they would like to give to other women who were experiencing domestic violence. Their replies were so moving that I felt it was important to repeat them all in full.

Amber was concerned that women should get justice from the legal system:

Get witnesses. Never be left alone with him. Get Dictaphones, get video cameras in your corner. That's the only way you'll keep your house. Is have some way to record it as evidence and get them put away. Indisputable evidence – gather it whatever it takes. that may be sad that the woman's voice isn't heard, but women's voice is not heard. Our word against theirs. And they often get so isolated ... completely alone and have nobody or nothing. And um ... I suppose okay, to women who might be there with domestic violence and suffering domestic abuse - it's not you - you don't deserve it. And, you know, trust what you know is right and what you know is wrong. Definitely.

Three women focussed on encouraging women to leave as soon as they felt ready:

Just leave as soon as you can. I mean just don't even pack a bag, just walk out the door and just keep walking till you find somebody that'll help you. And don't go back.  
Leanne

Get out. And go for it, you know. There's help out there so they've got to do it. They've got to see that gateway and just go for it. You know, if they've got ... I mean I had to be strong, I was determined. I planned it like 2, maybe 3 months, getting out of here, 'I'm getting out of here.' That's all I kept saying to myself. 'I hate him' ... I loved him but I hated him. I shoved the love to one side and kept thinking to myself 'I hate him, I hate him, I'm getting out of here now'

Charmian

Move out of the house and go in a refuge. But in your own time. when you're ready to move out.  
Maddy

Sally and Lindy wanted to remind women of the effects on the children of witnessing, or being involved in abuse and the need to protect them by leaving:

Call the cops sooner than later. Because the sooner you do it they could get evicted. The longer you leave it they don't get. It's hard to tell anybody, but tell somebody. If it's not the police tell somebody, because ... I didn't tell nobody. My kids got it because I didn't tell nobody. I didn't get out of the relationship. I don't want to see other women and children go through what my children's done, what I've gone through. Tell somebody. Don't let your children go through what my kids have gone through. That is the one thing that I really am upset about is that I let my kids go through what they went through. Cos I didn't tell nobody, didn't get out. It was hard. And I know it'd be hard for other women to get out of the relationship. But if their husband works, get out of it when they're at work. Don't tell nobody ... don't tell him that you're going. As soon as he's gone pack your stuff, get out of there. Or pack as much as you can and get out of it.

Sally

I think when you first get that message in your head 'I don't want this any more' go. Because that message keeps coming back. It's not until it's ... usually when it's too late and something really drastic happens you do actually get up and leave. Listen to your intuition. Cos I do ... I do feel guilty what I put my children through. Because you want the rose tinted glasses don't you 'This is my family and this is normal', but it's not. So ... recognising. I don't have to put up with it.' Cos I probably ... I think if I met somebody who ... I'd probably go and pack their bag for them. I'd want to go and say 'Come on, we can do this'. But until that person's ready they're not going anywhere.

Lindy

There were also warnings not to repeat the cycle of leaving and returning:

Get out while you can. No seriously. I would say get away from it, don't put up with it. You know cos you can only be a punchbag for so long, you can only be put under domestic violence for so long. I was for years, through two marriages, two divorces. At the end of the day you could end up losing everything. I mean I

lost my children through my husband. You could end up losing your children, you could end up losing everything. So I'd say get out while you can. And don't go back to them. And don't go back. DO NOT GO BACK Molly

Get out ... get out, get help.' And I would advise anyone just leave. Just leave, because it's just going to be a cycle. And it'll probably be all right for a little while but it will just go back again, do you know what I mean? And obviously it depends on what level but ...abuse is abuse. If you know to yourself that something's not right and you're not happy and your children are unhappy, then you shouldn't be there, it's simple. You shouldn't be there Jeannie

Stay away. Don't go back. Cut off everyone and everything that was around you at the time. And just try and make a new life. Cos it can be done. And once you've done it for a bit it does become easier. Because if you're going into a place like a refuge and then end up going back to where you came from I think you've wasted time and a lot of resources. Yeah cos they're there to help you and to help you stay away. So ... and I think you end up being a lot stronger if you do stay away. You have to stay away. Cos to go back it's just starting that cycle all over again. You know if you keep going back you'll never get away. So you have to stay away. But yeah it's hard cutting everyone off, you cut your family off for a while, you know you cut all your closest friends off, everything you've known, for however many years. But you have to do it or else you'll end up becoming basically nothing. You'll have nothing to look forward to, no future, you know. No, you've got to stay away. For the long term. And as I say it can be done. It's got to be done. Briony

And for three, the emphasis was on life after leaving:

Very simple – don't put up with it, get out. Yeah. There is another life after. You've just to believe it. Keira

Don't be a victim. As soon as you think that the bad has outweighed the good, make an effort to get strong and get out. Because it really isn't as bad as you ever think it's going to be. Sylvia

As much as they're feeling scared now and it is a scary thought to actually take the leap, it does get better. That's not the only life there is for them ... definitely. Just takes, you know, a big brave step. Liz

#### **Note**

1. All of the names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

#### **Bibliography**

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